

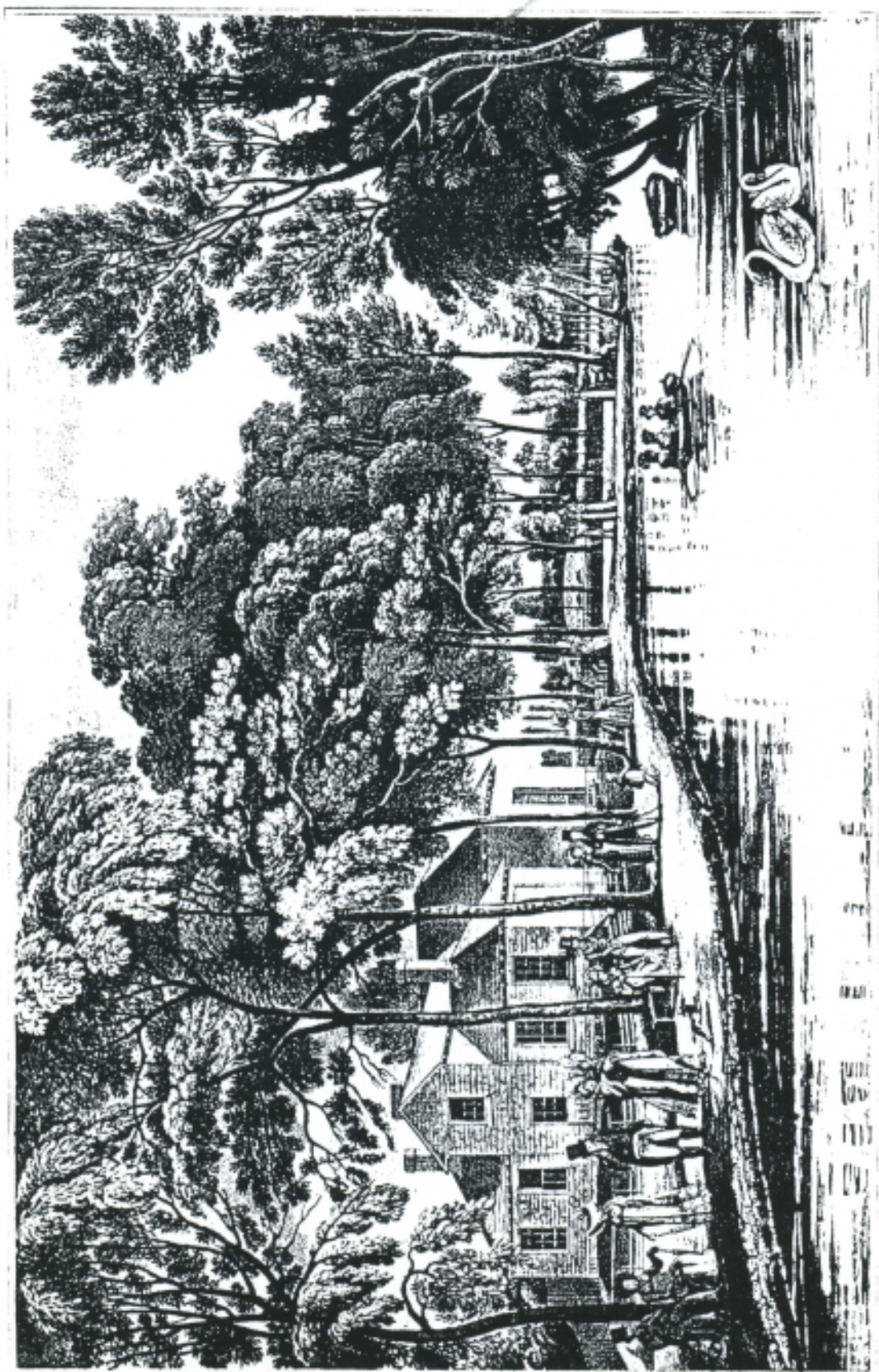
CHAPTER 3

THE BATHS AT THETFORD SPA, 1818-38.

Mayor Faux had the Chalybeate Spring cleaned and paving laid. The Thetford Mineral Spring Company founded in 1818 raised £1,500 intending to make the town a fashionable spa.¹ By May 1820 a Pump Room with hot and cold baths was almost complete. Mr Bailey, the appointed Doctor, said these would, "greatly alleviate human suffering."² The management committee's 1820 annual report stated the Company would bring health to the afflicted, prosperity to the town and remuneration to shareholders, who included many eminent local business men. It claimed 10,000, non-residents, including the Prince Regent, had already visited the Spa!

Hunt's claim that the spa was available for, "free and unrestrained use of the poor," is contradicted by M.W.D., who refers to, "poor supplied with water free in the yard," and the Pump Room's popularity and baths, "replete with every convenience."³ A newspaper advertised hot and cold baths, either chalybeate or common water, available from 6 A.M. to 9 P.M at half an hours notice.⁴ Accum estimated the output as 12 gallons per hour, of which 120-160 were bottled and dispatched daily, so it is questionable how many chalybeate baths were available! It is hardly surprising the spa closed in 1838.

A 19th Century etching (overleaf) showing Spring Walk, the fashionable promenade, the Pump House and river is entitled, "The Baths at Thetford," suggesting this aspect was important. No evidence was found of the Bath House built in 1834 and recorded by Hunt, possibly he is inaccurate.⁵ Thetford's contemporary population was about 3000, but the Burrell Works, founded 1770, were expanding. For a brief period, Thetford was more prosperous.



THE BATHS AT THETFORD

- ¹ Letter from Mayor Faux to the public, 15/5/1820.
- ² Letter from Dr. Bailey to the management, 8/5/1820.
- ³ Gentleman's Magazine, 1821, p.313-4.
- ⁴ Bury And Norwich Post, 2/5/1821, "Thetford Spa."
- ⁵ Hunt, 1870, p.294.

CHAPTER 4

PROVISION OF PUBLIC BATHS, 1921-61.

The Spa closed before the 1846 Public Baths and Washhouses Act gave councils permissive powers to provide hot and cold baths. Sanitary conditions in late 19th Century Thetford were appalling even by contemporary standards,¹ yet no provision was made until 1921. Hot baths costing 6d, of which the attendant received 1d, with separate male and female sessions were available at the Town Hall, Friday and Saturday evenings, and Thursday evenings respectively.² Few had bathrooms and most continued to rely on tin baths as 6d was too expensive. Hence it is surprising provision was finally made in the same year as an Unemployment Committee was set up.³

In 1938 only 23% of houses had flush toilets draining into cess-pools or the river, 45% had pail closets using the night soil cart and 32% privy middens relying on absorption into the earth.⁴ The sewerage scheme, developed in 1949-52 finally resolved the, "disgraceful conditions," described 80 years previously by Dr Stevens, Ministry Inspector.⁵ In 1952 the opening hours were reduced as demand had fallen, and in 1961 when there were only 21 users weekly, charges became 2/-, the only change in 40 years.⁶ Obviously improved housing and sanitation were responsible for the decline in usage.

¹ Crosby, 1986, p.104-107.

² Municipal Corporation Minute Book, 8/4/21.

³ Highways And Byways Committee, 23/7/21.

⁴ Crosby, 1986, p.117.

⁵ Hunt, 1870, Copy of original report, p.400-485.

⁶ Finances And General Purposes Committee, 5/12/61.

CHAPTER 5

THE CORPORATION SWIMMING BATH, NUN'S BRIDGES POOL 1922-73.

The general economic depression of the late 1920's and 1930's hit Thetford early. The famous Charles Burrell Engineering Works had employed a quarter of the town's male work-force, but was rapidly declining as tractors and lorries replaced steam engines.¹ In July 1921, the council appointed the Unemployment Committee to create relief work,² which included long needed improvements to the Bathing Station.³ (Appendix 12) Mayor Brown thought civic pride would be promoted by good bathing facilities which the fee paying Grammar Schools could advertise to attract pupils to the town, and a council run, "swimming and bathing club," with subscriptions would be a possibility.⁴ The latter never materialised although in 1967 the attendant asked permission to start one.

A 50 yard stretch of river-bed was smoothed and graded in depth from 2' to 7' - suitable for all. Wooden piles holding the bank were replaced by concrete walls and The Sheds were further enlarged to 150' x 36'.⁵ The river may have been widened previously. The 1928 Ordnance Survey map shows a larger building and three sided bath cut into the bank, not on the 1905 map. (Appendix 13) In May 1922 the Bathing Committee visited Norwich Pool and recommended a 15' wide concrete poolside.

Shortly before completion a newspaper heralded the pool as a "New Municipal Entertainment".⁶ At the re-opening in June, the Mayor expressed pleasure at, "the good turn out." There were formal races, fun events, and a life-saving demonstration. He praised the unemployed, without whom the facilities would not have materialised so soon. He was safety conscious hoping everyone would learn to swim, enabling them to save lives. Although expressing a wish that ladies would participate, it is questionable whether he favoured emancipation as he later commented it was a real acquisition, especially for boys and young men! Already on one occasion there were 100 bathers.⁷

The Sheds included cubicled and communal changing accommodation for both sexes, an attendant's room and primitive toilets. The building had creosoted timber

walls and corrugated iron roof. Doors had gaps top and bottom allowing light to enter. Fittings were basic - benches and pegs. General maintenance was minimal, re-creosoting or repairing roofing, but in 1931 timber costing £26.5.0 was used to construct new cubicles, presumably when the number was doubled to 24.⁸ Not until 1959 was the slatted floor replaced by boards.

The pool was well equipped with a matting covered diving platform of 3', 4'6" and 6' heights, a springboard, and bars along its length. Three sets of steps gave access to the marked depths. The bottom lacked concrete making diving relatively safe.

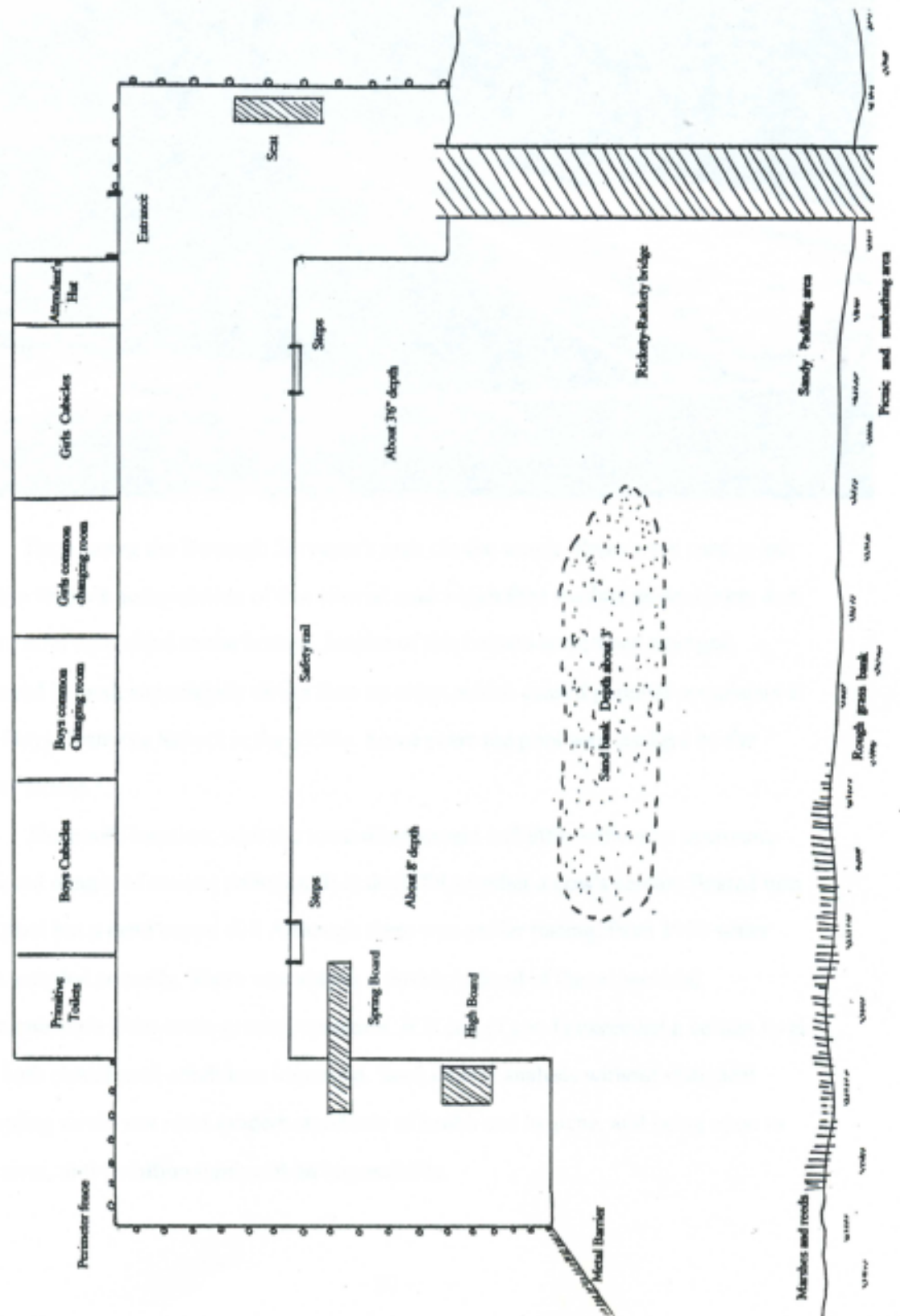
The pool and bathing sheds - 1928



In 1934 the unemployed were paid £90 for clearing and cementing. Although rather isolated there was never a telephone, and a single life-belt and first aid box were the only emergency equipment. The plan overleaf shows layout of pool and Sheds as remembered by three 1950's and 60's users. Today the concrete walls and surround, bars and metal steps remain:

NUN'S BRIDGE RIVER POOL - AN OUTLINE PLAN (not to scale)

This plan is based on sketches drawn by Mr D. Osborne and Mr & Mrs M. Knights and from personal observation



The pool in 1993



Each spring the Borough Surveyor's men cut the weeds. Poles were used to stir up the winter's accumulation of fine alluvial mud which then washed downstream, and extra sand was added to the bottom. In spite of this bathers sometimes emerged covered in mud, superficially dirtier than on entry, which caused parental complaints at the Boys Grammar School in the 1950's. Some years the pool was dredged by the River Board.⁹

The pool's location, with the town downstream and little settlement upstream, reduced danger of serious pollution. It is doubtful whether a cow's carcass floated into the pool but a dead coypu did! Although there was earlier testing, from 1950 water was sampled annually. There was always a threshold level of faecal bacterial contamination from cattle grazing upstream. If *B.coli* (Type 1) exceeded a certain level the bath closed until conditions improved. Such limited analysis without statistical sampling would not meet modern standards of health and hygiene, and being open to the river, anti-pollution treatment an impossibility.

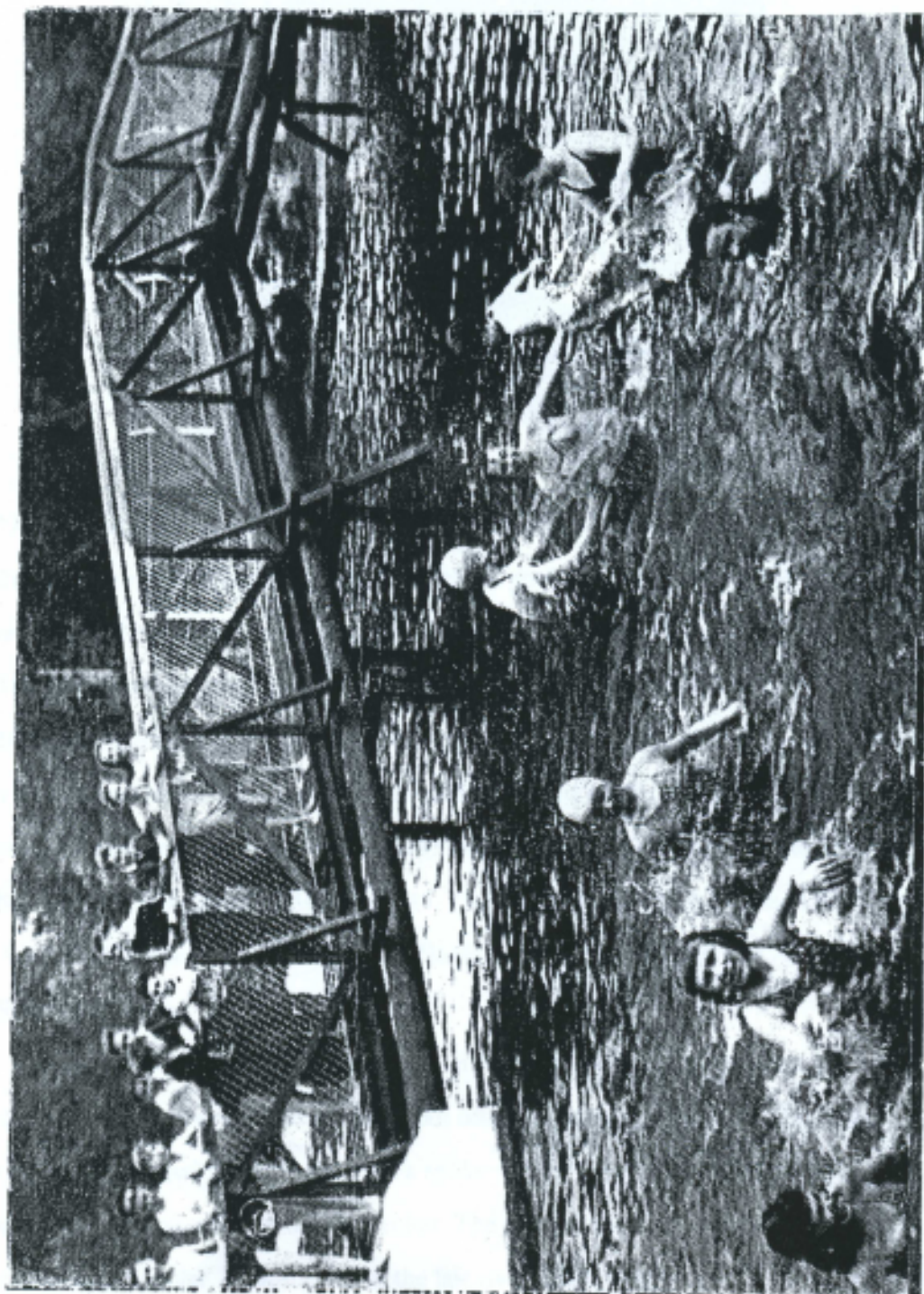
Widespread drought in 1938 caused closure of similar pools, as rivers were considered "full of germs," but Thetford's were tested and declared safe.¹⁰ The pool was temporarily closed in 1954, but after sampling at eight locations the Great Ouse River Board reported, "The river is as safe as any river is likely to be for bathing." Their results were forwarded to the Council's insurers, and their third party liability policy was extended, subject to displaying disclaimer notices.¹¹ In 1960 the sanitary officer, concerned about the pool and Barnham Common bathing spot, ordered routine sampling over two months with undesirable but not injurious results!¹² In 1963 effluent from R.A.F Barnham sewage works was suspected but found satisfactory - as usual cattle were held responsible!¹³ Presence of crude sewage in 1969 sparked a Ministry of Health investigation and after emptying of overflowing farm septic tanks the B.coli level fell dramatically.¹⁴ Polio caused concern in the 1950's with immunisation in great demand. One season the pool was closed and children, forbidden to bathe elsewhere, felt cheated of their usual holiday entertainment.

Most years the sole attendant was an older man, who, if he could swim, was too busy to (effectively) supervise bathers. He sold tickets, hired costumes and towels, cleaned the changing accommodation and poolside, and assisted non-swimmers. Mr Drake, 1926-1935, walked along supporting learners in a webbing loop suspended from a pole (Appendix 14). In the late 1950's, Bert Foreman, a typical Norfolk character, complete with trilby, belt and braces, threatened to, "square boys up," for misdemeanours. He was once thrown in and had to be rescued! Not until 1961, following complaints concerning the attendant's lack of life-saving skills, was a more suitable appointment made.¹⁵

Each Spring the Baths Committee determined opening arrangements and charges, but these changed little. Advertisements were placed in local papers and Bathing Bills posted in prominent places including The Sheds. The season was Whitsun to the end of August but the chairman had discretionary powers to make changes according to weather. Daily opening was 9.30 A.M. to dusk but until later years only 1pm on Sundays (Appendix 15). In 1925 the Clergy requested making this

10 A.M. because young people were not attending services. A Councillor declared they needed to show concern for care for, "bodies as well as souls."¹⁶ Subscribers had reserved times with schools having exclusive use during their allotted times. This was temporarily lost during World War II due to demand from troops but reinstated because their conduct undermined discipline. Even before the 1922 reconstruction was complete the Grammar schools had promised 100 subscriptions. Bank Holidays and Sundays were open sessions. In 1922 charges were 2/6, 5/- and 10/- for a child's, adult's or family subscription and individual swims 6d, with bathing limited to 30 minutes. In 1943 spectators were charged 2/6 for the season or 2d per visit (Appendix 16). Charges were raised in 1952, with 15-18 year olds paying 5/- and adults 7/6. As with the Guildhall Baths it seems incredible charges were high during mass unemployment yet not significantly increased in more affluent later years. Money was probably why many changed on the opposite bank and slipped across into the pool, especially when the bath was closed. Children of the 1950's thought it expensive, so played and bathed here. Families, especially those with toddlers, used this area. In 1951 the council was concerned at loss of potential income and damage by out of hours bathers. The bank's owner was willing to lease at a peppercorn rent but the stockproof fence he stipulated was too expensive.¹⁷ Two years later when re-approached¹⁸ he declined saying he did not wish to deprive the young children.¹⁹ In 1957 a new owner agreed to lease for 21 years and the area was fenced and landscaped into a mini "lido".²⁰ A rickety-rackety bridge gave access via the pool entrance (see overleaf). Trips to the beach, 40 miles away, were expensive so families continued to spend fine weekends here, encouraging young children into believing it was the seaside! The lack of a skill threshold meant everyone could enjoy the facility, if only paddling. Following closure in 1972, the pool equipment, sheds and fencing were removed but the bridge remained until 1978 and until the bank became overgrown its use continued.

Swimming in the River Pool
by the Rickert-rackety Bridge
(Thetford Town Guide - circa 1960)



The bridge and north bank lido area - 1976, four years after closure



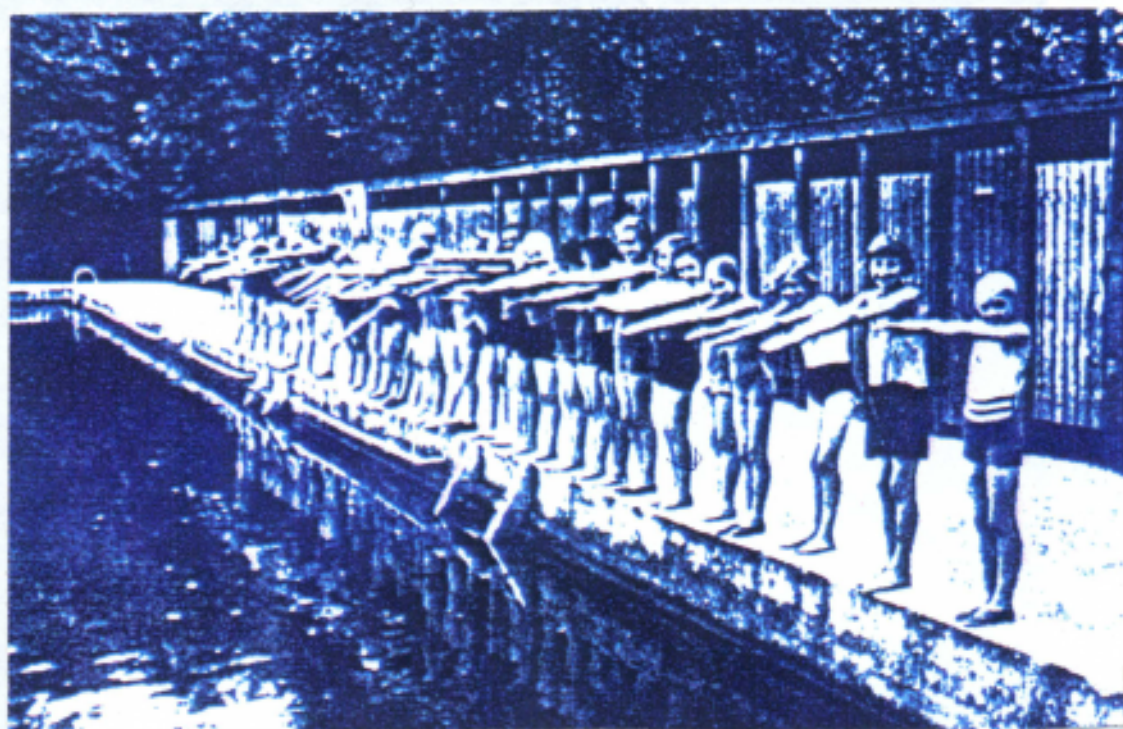
The original single sex Thetford schools, Council and Grammar, swam most years from 1922 until the Secondary Modern School pool opened in 1967.²¹ Most lessons were formal but lacked expertise, with the "pole and belt" aid used into the 1950's. The Girls Grammar took swimming seriously with well supported sports from 1923. A 1930's prospectus lists swimming as compulsory, and the 1939 photo (overleaf) shows a very formal lesson in progress. A late 1920's old girl recalls instruction was concentrated on water safety and in 1937 another received an award for rescuing a boy from the February floods.²² In 1945, 15 girls trained for their Bronze Life Saving Award. The girls also achieved well in Norfolk County Proficiency and ASA Personal Survival Awards.²³

In spite of a long tradition dating from 1890 the Boys Grammar were less dedicated. They too had annual sports but often with few competitors. The master responsible for swimming in the 1950's spoke of their enjoyment of informal lessons where they learnt mainly from each other. The plunge, then A.S.A accredited, was particularly popular. Performance at the last river sports was poor and it was hoped new facilities would foster improvement.

Thetford Girls' Grammar School - 1939
Swimming lesson in the River Pool
(from an original photograph in the school archives)



In 1936 Norfolk Education Committee (NEC) issued Leaflet 60 authorising weekly swimming lessons with fees reimbursed on a first come first served basis, but few schools had facilities available. The Girl's Council School Headmistress acted quickly and more girls swam - presumably the subscription had previously prevented some.²⁴ Their first swimming sports were in 1937 and this photo from that same year shows them formally lined up, with the cubicles behind:



In 1950 the County Girls' P.E. Adviser gave instruction in land and water training, and tested for county awards.²⁵ It is likely that some girls on the photo circa 1963 (see overleaf) are Londoners.

By the 1930's swimming was compulsory at the Boy's Council School. Regardless of weather, they were marched to the baths with kit rolled up under right arm. Lined up on the edge, they had to jump in on the whistle. Twenty years later the approach was similar and like the other schools they adopted the county award scheme although instruction was minimal (Appendix 17). In summer 1967 the now mixed Norwich Road County Primary School used the pool for the last time, resulting in a major loss of subscribers.²⁶

Eastern Daily Press circa 1963



FRESH from a dip during a warm spell on Monday these children make a cheerful picture as they dry off in the open air at Theford Swimming Pool.

After the war there was an increasing awareness of insurance liability. At one stage NEC paid only 2/- for season tickets with children having the option of paying the extra 6d, but responsibility was questionable with this arrangement. Later they paid the full amount, with the proviso that the attendant could remove tickets from those creating a nuisance. If schools swam in the attendant's absence, the Council would not accept liability.²⁷

The Sheds were a meeting place for teenagers who chatted if the water was too cold. Usually about 54°F, a temperature of 66° was considered a heatwave. It was displayed on a blackboard but the children were rarely put off, although occasionally it was only 47°! Adults were less enthusiastic but in pre-war days young men regularly swam after work, for hygiene as well as enjoyment. The pool usage figures and graph for 1926-43 show subscribers doubling over the period (Appendix 18). Individual swims fluctuate greatly presumably determined by weather - the maximum of 4644 in 1942 is small compared with 14,783 in the unusually warm 1959 season when 534 attended on 7th July!²⁸ Accounts for this period always showed a small loss with expenditure on wages, printing and bill posting, and, washing and mending costumes and towels. Occasionally new ones were bought, and items like creosote and timber (Appendix 19)

Some adults who arrived early in the expansion, especially those whose children had lessons at the pool, used it themselves and were involved in fund-raising for a new one, but some later arrivals were unaware of it. In general it was true that, "The Londoners no, they never used it. They thought we were a load of hillbillies!" (Appendix 20). However at a poorly attended public meeting in 1961 re the proposed new pool, it was commented that had the council declared the river pool closed the hall would have been packed - reflecting its popularity.²⁹

In 1937 the council consulted the River Board about constructing a new pool. A decade later one was planned for Spring Meadow adjoining the spa, donated by Sir William Gentle for a children's playground, but there were objections.

Spring Meadow, donated to the town by Sir William Gentle:



It is surprising legislation did not enforce pool closure. Possibly the council choose to regard it as controlled river bathing which would also explain why it is not recorded in White's or Kelly's directories or on the Regional Sports Council's Map of Water-based Facilities.³⁰ Contrastingly in 1939 City of Birmingham closed its first outdoor pool

built 1873 because of the prohibitive cost of installing a chlorination and filtration system meeting new government standards for Local Authority pools.³¹ Without town expansion a modern pool at Thetford would not have been financially feasible, and conversion of the river pool was an impossibility.

- 1 Crosby, 1986, p.109.
- 2 Highways And Byways Committee, 23/7/21.
- 3 *ibid.*, 27/10/21.
- 4 Bury And Norwich Post, 31/5/22.
- 5 *ibid.*, 21/6/22.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Bury And Norwich Post, 31/5/22.
- 8 *ibid.*, 21/6/22.
- 9 Pool Accounts, 1927-44.
- 10 Baths Committee, 24/4/44, and 29/5/47.
- 11 Town Clerk' Correspondence Files.
- 12 Finance And General Purposes Committee, 14/9/54.
- 13 Town Development And Planning Committee, 20/7/60.
- 14 Public Health Committee, 21/8/63.
- 15 *ibid.*, 17/10/69.
- 16 Parks And Pleasure Grounds Committee, 3/10/61.
- 17 Bury And Norwich Post, 15/7/25, "Sunday Bathing Opposed."
- 18 Baths Committee, 25/4/51.
- 19 Parks And Pleasure Grounds Committee, 23/9/53.
- 20 Thetford And Watton Times, 29/9/53, "Proposal To Stop Illegal Bathing Losses From Corporation Swimming Baths."
- 21 Parks And Pleasure Grounds Committee, 18/2/54.
- 22 *ibid.*, 22/3/57.
- 23 Council School Log Books and Grammar School Magazines.
- 24 Town Guide, 1938.
- 25 Girls' Grammar Swimming Record Book.
- 26 Town Clerk's Correspondence Files.
- 27 Girls' Council School Log Book.
- 28 Parks And Pleasure Grounds Committee, 10/4/68.
- 29 *ibid.*, 1/5/57.
- 30 *ibid.*, 29/9/59.
- 31 Thetford And Watton Times And Downham Gazette, 17/2/61.
- 32 ERSC First Appraisal Of Facilities, 1967.
- 33 Moth, 1951, p.64.